

His kiss 991

Chapter 991

When he finally found his voice, it came out strained. “Gabriela — if Allan’s accident was truly a conspiracy, would you blame me?”

If this turned out to be the truth, would it give her yet another reason to close herself off from him entirely?

“No,” she said, without hesitation. “You had no knowledge of it. And even Allan would not blame you.” But she would not forgive whoever had acted in his name. That was a different matter entirely.

“I understand.”

Wesley rose from his chair. His steps were heavy as he left the villa.

He drove directly to the Moss family’s old residence.

Roger greeted him with a rare smile. “You’ve arrived at just the right time — I have several matters regarding the board I wanted to discuss with you...”

“Grandfather.” Wesley’s voice stopped him. “I have something to ask you first.”

The gravity in Wesley's expression made Roger uneasy. Still, he nodded. "Go ahead."

"You told me not to investigate Randall." Wesley lowered his head, his voice quiet and strained, as if the words were being forced out of him one by one. "I did anyway."

Roger's fingers trembled almost imperceptibly. He steadied himself. "Oh? And what did you find?"

"He confessed everything."

Wesley raised his head. His eyes were bloodshot, and something that looked very much like hatred had settled in them. "Grandfather — why did you do it?"

Roger's brow furrowed. He dismissed the butler with a quiet word and instructed the door to be guarded. No one was to approach.

"Since you already know," Roger said, "I have no reason to hide it."

Wesley's fingers curled silently at his sides.

So that was how it would be. The truth spoken plainly, as if it cost nothing. Perhaps because the people involved had died years ago and it no longer mattered. Or perhaps because ordinary people — people like Allan — had never mattered enough to warrant caution, alive or dead.

Roger held Wesley's cold, dark gaze — and slowly began to speak.

No one could say how much time passed inside that room.

When Wesley finally emerged from the Moss family estate, his face was drained of all color. The sky had opened while he was inside. Torrential rain hammered the city, blurring the streets and filling the gutters.

He drove back through the storm to his estate and sat beneath the porch in silence, watching the rain beat down against the lotus blooms in the garden, bending them low and letting them rise. His expression was unreadable.

That night, Wesley did not sleep.

The rain fell harder and harder, as though the sky had no intention of letting up.

Gabriela was unable to sleep. The weight of what they had uncovered pressed on her — this was a matter that concerned a life, a life already lost. She wondered whether Wesley had managed to learn anything. And if the truth was exactly what they suspected, what would he do with it?

She stood at the window, watching the rain streak down the glass, a heaviness settling in her chest.

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She had held onto the diary for a long time before sharing it with Wesley — partly out of concern, partly out of something she could not quite bring herself to name. He was, after all, the only man she had ever truly loved. She could not bear the thought of him being haunted by something he had no part in.

She was still pacing restlessly when her phone rang. An unknown number.

She answered — and heard Roger's voice on the other end.

She had never expected to have any direct contact with the powerful elder. As soon as the call connected, he spoke without preamble. "Wesley isn't well. Go to his apartment and keep him company."

Gabriela understood immediately. Wesley had confronted Roger. And Roger had admitted to it.

Her breath caught. Her chest tightened.

Memories of Allan surfaced — Allan, who had been so full of life, who had worked hard every single day simply to keep living it. The accident had happened years ago, and still the loss felt raw. Did being without wealth and influence mean a person's life was worth less? Did it make them expendable?

She kept her voice steady. “What happened to Wesley? Can you tell me, Roger?”

Roger’s expression darkened on the other end of the line. He had expected tears, compliance, immediate concern — not a question directed back at him. Did this girl think that having a child with Wesley made her untouchable? That Wesley’s affection guaranteed her a place in the Moss family?

“Just go,” he said, impatience sharpening his tone. “If you wish to join the Moss family, you must first learn to be respectful and compliant. Don’t ask questions that aren’t your place to ask.”

Gabriela drew a slow breath, choosing not to argue with an elder. She explained, calmly and politely, “Sir, it’s pouring heavily outside. Driving from here to Wesley’s apartment will take at least an hour. If the situation isn’t urgent, I don’t think it’s necessary to make a special trip. I hope you understand.”

Roger had no interest in understanding. His voice turned colder. “Is this how you show respect to the elders of the Moss family?”

Gabriela was taken aback. She and Wesley had long since parted ways. She had no desire to marry into any wealthy family. She was already being as courteous as she could manage.

“Roger, I think there may be a misunderstanding—”

Hearing her push back, Roger’s tone grew heavier still. “Rather than arguing, why not simply go and check on him?”

In Roger's view, Gabriela's standing wasn't even worthy of tying Wesley's shoelaces. She was an illegitimate daughter — and an unmarried mother at that. If she couldn't even be obedient, how could the Moss family ever accept her? Gabriela had no wish to trade words with an arrogant old man. She replied simply, "Alright."

Roger's expression eased slightly, a condescending note entering his voice. "Once Wesley feels better, he can bring you to the family home for a meal and introduce you properly."

"Thank you for the offer, but there is no need," Gabriela replied without hesitation. "Wesley and I are finished. You have nothing to worry about — I will never stand in his way." A brief pause. "If there is nothing else, I will hang up now."

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Roger's face darkened to something beyond displeasure.

He was a man accustomed to reverence. Everyone in his circle treated him with absolute deference — yet here was this young woman speaking to him as though they were equals, and then ending the call herself.

"Unbelievable."

His breathing grew uneven with agitation. The butler rushed to his side at once, helping him into his chair, offering medicine and warm water.

Once he had taken his medication, the butler spoke in a measured, soothing voice. “She is simply inexperienced and unaccustomed to proper etiquette. In future, if you have instructions for her, allow someone else to convey them. Someone of her standing is not worth your personal attention.”

The words worked, slowly bringing Roger’s fury down to a simmer.

Perhaps it had been the shock of Wesley’s reaction to the truth that had prompted him to call Gabriela so impulsively in the first place. But that girl — did she genuinely believe that Wesley’s feelings toward her gave her the right to speak to him that way?

Gabriela, for her part, gave Roger’s state of mind no further thought.

Her heart was heavy.

Wesley now knew the truth. He would be devastated. And his health was already fragile — if he drove himself into illness over this...

She looked out at the downpour, assessed the road conditions and her own driving, then reached for her car keys.

She told Farley to look after Truett for the night. Farley warned her against going out in weather like this and urged her to be careful. Gabriela promised she would, and meant it.

The rain was relentless. Visibility had dropped to almost nothing, and she drove slowly, hands steady on the wheel, until she arrived safely outside Wesley's apartment.

She parked, opened her umbrella, and walked in.

Wesley was still seated under the eaves, exactly where Billy had been pleading with him to leave. The rain had intensified and the temperature had fallen sharply, cold water beginning to creep under the overhang. Wesley was damp and pale, his hair wet, his face emptied of expression.

"Mr. Moss, please go inside," Billy urged. "Your health can't take this."

Wesley did not look up. His voice was flat, drained of everything. "Leave me alone for a while. You can go."

Billy neither dared push further nor dared walk away. He had no idea what had happened, but Wesley's state frightened him, and he could not bring himself to leave.

Then the gate opened. A slender figure came hurrying through the rain toward them.

When Billy recognized Gabriela, he exhaled with quiet relief. Whatever had brought Wesley to this state, he believed — trusted — that her arrival would change something.

Gabriela closed her umbrella and stepped under the eaves. She looked at Wesley for a moment, then spoke softly.

“I know you’re in pain. But you cannot do this to yourself. Let’s go inside.”

Wesley raised his head slowly and looked at her. His eyes were red at the edges.

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Gabriela was startled by the look in his eyes.

“You have something to say to me, don’t you?” She took his hand gently and spoke in a quiet, steady voice. “Let’s go inside and talk.” Her touch was warm and unhurried, and something in it seemed to reach him where words could not.

Wesley let her lead him inside without resistance.

Billy discreetly exhaled and made himself scarce.

In the living room, Gabriela retrieved a towel and dried Wesley’s rain-dampened hair with careful hands. “Change into something dry first,” she said softly.

Wesley shook his head. His gaze was fixed on her, steady and intense, as though afraid she might disappear the moment he looked away.

“I’ll be right here waiting,” Gabriela said. “I’m not going anywhere. I want to know what happened too.”

Only then did Wesley nod and go to change.

With the rain-soaked clothes gone, some of the weight seemed to lift from him as well. Gabriela had poured him a cup of hot water by the time he returned. He drank it to the last drop, and slowly, color crept back into his face.

Then he reached out and pulled her into his arms.

Gabriela tensed and began to pull back. Wesley’s voice came out rough and low. “Don’t move. Let me hold you for a moment. Please.”

Gabriela went still.

For someone like Wesley, who had grown up in a world of constant achievement and praise, perhaps the only wound that had ever truly broken through was his heart condition — the years spent fighting to survive, only to find that surviving brought its own unbearable burdens. In moments like this, stripped of composure and control, he looked like any other man. Vulnerable, undone, and quietly falling apart.

Noticing that she had stopped resisting, Wesley's hold around her waist tightened slowly.

He would tell her the truth soon. And if, after hearing it, she chose to step away from him, this might be the last time he was allowed to hold her like this. The thought made something inside him rebel fiercely. If he could live those years again, he would go to any length — even sacrifice himself — to have saved Allan. He could not bear the thought of even a trace of hatred entering Gabriela's eyes when she looked at him.

Time passed in quiet heaviness until Wesley finally let go.

Before Gabriela could ask, he began.

Years ago, Wesley had built Apex Group from nothing. By its third year, the net profit had reached a staggering figure. Roger, impressed by his grandson's exceptional ability, had decided to groom him as the family heir. Then Wesley fell gravely ill. Renowned doctors from across the country were consulted — foreign specialists were flown in — and none of them could offer hope. His rare blood type made finding a matching heart nearly impossible. He lay in the hospital, waiting.

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It was Lauren who came to Roger with a proposal. She claimed she could save Wesley, but in exchange she required a promise: a major project that would elevate the McCoy family's standing — and a marriage alliance.

Roger agreed without hesitation, asking no questions about how a matching heart would be found.

A heart did appear, not long after. The donor had suffered a severe car accident.

Roger could guess at the reason. But to save his grandson, he had chosen not to look further. The surgery succeeded. Roger fulfilled his end: the McCoy family was awarded a significant project and rose accordingly. The marriage was deferred — Wesley had just come back from the edge of death and would not be easily directed — but Roger proposed a compromise, suggesting the younger generation spend time together and allow feelings to develop naturally before any formal engagement was discussed.

Wesley, once recovered, threw himself entirely into his work. He barely crossed paths with Rebecca, let alone considered marrying her. The engagement only became possible when Gabriela entered the picture, giving Roger a lever to apply pressure until Wesley relented.

As for Lauren's promised favor — she had never called it in. She was likely saving it for a moment that mattered most.

Gabriela listened without interrupting.

Her expression remained composed, but her hands were clenched tightly in her lap.

Wesley's voice dropped to almost nothing. "Gabriela, I'm so sorry."

Roger had felt safe confessing because the truck driver who struck Allan had already served time — and four years ago, that man had died of cancer. The only witness was gone. Allan had been crossing against a red light when he was hit, and without direct, irrefutable evidence connecting Lauren to the act, her

guilt could never be established in court. Roger himself had no direct involvement in what was done. Allan's death had its scapegoat, and everyone else walked free.

Gabriela felt a sudden sting behind her eyes. "So even knowing the truth, there is no way to bring justice for Allan. Is that it?"

"No." Wesley's jaw tightened, his voice fierce and low. "Gabriela, I will find the evidence. I will personally put Lauren in prison." His eyes held the kind of resolve that did not waver.

Gabriela's nose burned. "Wesley, if there is anything I can do to help, you must tell me."

Wesley said nothing at first. He only looked at her, searching her face. "Gabriela — can I still come to you, after all of this?" The real question beneath the words hung unspoken between them: Will you turn away from me because of what you now know?

"Wesley, you should not blame yourself." Gabriela took his hand and held it. "Allan is gone, and nothing will change that. But you survived — and whatever the circumstances, you must go on living, and living well." Her eyes were sincere and steady. "Those of us who are still here must look forward."

The emotions Wesley had held back all night finally broke through. Images of Allan, bloodied and broken, flashed through his mind like a knife drawn slowly across a nerve. He pulled Gabriela close, his voice fractured.

"Gabriela, thank you."

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Her own eyes reddened. But this time she did not struggle or push him away. She let him hold on.

Inwardly, in the quiet of that moment, she spoke without words: Allan, forgive me. I have forgiven him for you, without asking. But I promise — those who hurt you will not go unpunished.

Gabriela stayed the night at the apartment, though she took the guest room and left at dawn before Wesley woke.

He felt her absence the moment he opened his eyes. A hollow quiet greeted him where she should have been. But he had spent the night drowning in grief, and now daylight had come. It was time to move.

Wesley washed, dressed in his custom-made suit, and called Billy to pick him up.

They arrived at Crownridge Group headquarters early, well before the morning was fully awake. Wesley had successfully joined the board, though he remained a new face to many of the older shareholders. His reputation in Okburg, however, was well established — and the Eventide Vale project had been completed with such distinction that it had earned him the quiet respect of several veterans.

Today marked the second shareholders' meeting at Crownridge Group's headquarters.

Wesley stood at the window of the seventy-second floor of the Moss Group building, looking out over the sprawling city below. There was only one direction left to move: to the very top.

He would reach the zenith of power in Okburg — and when he did, no one would ever be expendable again.

The rain was still pouring outside, casting the entire city in a blurred, grey haze.

Gabriela returned to the villa and took out Allan's diary.

Both she and Wesley understood that finding evidence against Lauren after so many years was like searching for a needle in a haystack — otherwise, Roger would never have spoken so freely. But even without evidence, Gabriela could strip Lauren of everything. Every advantage Lauren had gained in the wake of Allan's death, Gabriela would dismantle, piece by piece.

Just as with Myah — rotten to her core since childhood, apparently fearless of consequences. Simple imprisonment was too clean a punishment. The truest punishment was a life lived in the constant shadow of fear.

As for Lauren — whatever she valued most, Gabriela would see it destroyed.

With that resolve settled firmly in her chest, Gabriela picked up her phone and called Matthew.

Matthew was in his study at that moment, speaking with Beverley.

Chapter 997

Since Rebecca had joined the board, she had managed to secure one or two projects — but both had turned out to be traps. The most recent example was a resort collaboration. The contract was signed and the initial funds were transferred, only for the island in question to be designated an ecological protection zone, barring any public development. It was a guaranteed loss. Several billion in startup funds would not shake the foundation of Everglow Group on their own, but Rebecca simply was not suited to business. Worse, Jasper had offered her no guidance whatsoever, seemingly content to watch her stumble. The board had grown critical of Rebecca, and Jasper's reputation for competence had risen in proportion. Slowly, quietly, the Everglow Group was drifting into his hands.

Soothing incense burned in the study, and the sound of rain lent the room a deceptive calm. Beverley, however, was far from calm. She fixed Matthew with a sharp look.

"This is your doing. That detached, hands-off philosophy of yours — handing the company over to Jasper was practically an open invitation for trouble."

Jasper had once seemed gentle and unambitious, a soft-spoken man with no apparent designs on power, so devoted to Rebecca that he had earned the nickname "Crazy Sister Lover." But over the past few years his ambition had surfaced unmistakably. Though he held little stock in Everglow Group outright, he controlled several of its most significant projects and had effectively brought the entire board under his influence.

Matthew knew the situation today owed something to his own lack of vigilance. He had no argument to offer and could only manage a helpless smile.

The mention of his "detached philosophy" brought Alanna to Beverley's mind — the woman who had carried so much of her son's grief — and from there, inevitably, Gabriela. Beverley sighed, a faint note of regret in her voice. "That girl Gabriela manages her little company quite well." If Gabriela returned, she

might stand a fighting chance against Jasper. And even if her abilities fell short, she had Wesley as a formidable ally.

Matthew felt even more helpless. He had tried every approach he could think of to persuade Gabriela, and every time she had refused. The girl was immovable when she had made up her mind.

Then his phone rang. It was Gabriela.

She came straight to the point the moment the call connected. “Does your offer still stand — for me to return to Everglow?”

Matthew, caught entirely off guard, answered immediately. “Of course it does.”

A quiet breath of relief came through the line. “I want to come back now. Is that alright?”

“Absolutely.” Matthew’s voice surged with joy. “I’ll arrange a proper date, host a banquet, and formally announce your identity to everyone.” A formal welcome, entry into the family records — it would make her return to the company seamless and unambiguous.

Gabriela was quiet for a few seconds.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last, hesitant. “But I don’t want to change my surname.”

The fact that she was willing to return to the Howard family at all was already more than Matthew had dared to hope for. Her surname was a small matter by comparison. He agreed without a moment's pause. "Of course. Whatever you wish."

Another brief silence.

Then, softly — "Thank you... Dad."

She had long recognized Matthew's kindness toward both her and Truett. But something had always kept the word at a distance, caught behind a knot she couldn't quite undo. This time, moved by his easy acceptance of her terms and the absence of any reproach in his voice, the word slipped out on its own.

On the other end, Matthew went completely still.

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When the silence cleared, his eyes were wet. He had waited so long to hear her say it — and she had said it so quietly, so naturally, as though it had always been there.

He steadied himself and asked carefully, voice low, "Gabriela, what did you just call me? Did I hear that correctly?"

"Dad," she said again, without wavering now that the barrier was down. "Thank you."

Matthew could not speak. His throat had closed entirely.

“I’ll come to see you when I can and we’ll talk through the details properly,” Gabriela said gently, and ended the call.

Matthew sat in silence for a long moment, then let the tears fall.

Alanna — our daughter has finally accepted me. From now on, I will take care of her. I will do what I should have done from the beginning.

Beverley noticed his reddened eyes and asked with quiet concern, “What did she say?”

“Gabriela has agreed to return to Everglow,” Matthew said, his voice thick with emotion. “I’m going to host a grand banquet — I want everyone to know she is my daughter.”

Beverley was glad, but a small frown crossed her face. “You must handle this carefully and consider Rebecca’s feelings.”

Rebecca had been working genuinely hard lately, transforming steadily from the spoiled young woman who had once thought only of her own pleasures. And Beverley still carried a private guilt over the annulment of Rebecca’s engagement to Wesley.

Matthew's excitement tempered slightly, but his resolve did not soften entirely. "Mother, I'll speak with Rebecca myself."

Beverley nodded. "They are both your daughters. Treat them both fairly."

Once the conversation with Beverley ended, Matthew set about organizing the banquet without delay.

After hanging up, Gabriela changed and drove to Presley's estate.

The designs had been finalized the previous day, and she wanted to review them one final time before sending them abroad.

Presley took one look at her and noticed the dark circles immediately. "Didn't sleep well? Are you worried the princess won't be satisfied?"

"No," Gabriela said.

She hesitated for a moment, then told Presley about her decision to return to the Howard family.

It had not been an easy choice. Her current life was stable — her company's profits were rising steadily, and her reputation as a designer was growing year by year. If she continued on this path, working with

discipline and focus, her future would be secure and satisfying. But returning to the Howard family meant stepping back into a world of intrigue and rivalry, facing adversaries far more formidable than her aunt's household had ever been.

Presley listened quietly, then rested a gentle hand on top of Gabriela's head.

"Make your own decision. Whatever happens, your mentor is always behind you."

The words were soft, but they carried a steadiness that settled something in Gabriela's chest. Her eyes grew a little misty without her meaning them to.

Chapter 999

Her mother had fallen seriously ill when Gabriela was very young and passed away within two years. Gabriela had always believed her mother's love for her was unconditional — but she had been so small then, and most of those memories had blurred with time. Fortunately, she had found warmth in unexpected places along the way: Farley, Ken, Kaleb, Loretta — and Presley.

"Mentor," Gabriela said quietly, "when you grow old and can't walk anymore, I'll take care of you. I mean it."

Presley's gentle expression shifted at once. The hand that had been resting on Gabriela's head switched from a pat to a firm tap. "You little rascal! I'm still young and perfectly capable, nowhere near needing anyone to look after me."

Gabriela laughed at being scolded for her own filial devotion. “Yes, Mentor — you look young and beautiful. People might even think we’re sisters when we stand together.”

“You little rascal, don’t get ahead of yourself!” Presley retorted, though the corners of her mouth betrayed her.

After a few more playful exchanges, mentor and student turned their attention back to the work at hand. They checked the bag together with painstaking care, packed it in an exquisite box, and sent it off by express courier.

On the third day, Princess Alvira received the handbag and called Presley personally to express her admiration.

Shortly afterward, the princess wore the bag to the earl’s birthday banquet — and by that same evening, it had become a topic of international discussion. Princess Alvira had long been considered a trendsetter in the fashion world, and even now, her every appearance was dissected with fascination. Online, commentators analyzed her hat, her dress, her shoes, every accessory. The elegant handbag drew particular attention. The Chinese embroidery on it earned praise from professionals worldwide, who studied its details closely — the composition, the color palette, the technical precision of every stitch. The verdict was unanimous: it was flawless.

During an interview, Princess Alvira revealed that the bag was a limited edition. There was only one in the world.

Soon enough, Gabriela’s name surfaced, and she stepped quietly onto the international stage of the fashion world.

Cindy was the first to notice and hurried into the office to report to Rebecca.

Rebecca was already in a foul mood over the losses from the beach resort project. Hearing the news, she flung a folder directly at Cindy.

“What nonsense are you talking about? Gabriela became famous internationally?” It was impossible. Even if Presley had taken her on as an apprentice, even if Presley had gone out of her way to have a princess endorse her work — how could someone with no formal artistic background rise to international recognition?

Cindy dodged instinctively. The folder hit the floor behind her with a sharp crack.

Rebecca fixed her with a cold glare. “You dare dodge?”

Cindy, shaken, quickly pressed on. “Sis, I also heard that Gabriela is returning to the Everglow Group — she’s competing for the family inheritance. Uncle isn’t just welcoming her back quietly; he’s throwing a banquet and publicly acknowledging her identity.”

Rebecca’s eyes reddened. One wave of anger had barely receded before another rose. “Is this confirmed?”

“Completely. The venue is already booked at an upscale hotel, and several prominent journalists have received invitations. This will likely spread online.”

Chapter 1000

Rebecca's face darkened, her hands crumpling the document she was holding. She had been working tirelessly — had even signed a loss-making project — and her father's response was not a word of comfort, but a public celebration for an illegitimate daughter while her back was turned?

Cindy continued, "There's more. SK Elite Boutique is hosting a fashion week at its Xamfield headquarters, and Gabriela is on the guest list — reportedly invited personally by the founder."

SK Elite Boutique was among the most prestigious luxury brands in the country, and its founder was notoriously private and low-profile. Rebecca herself had never managed to meet him. Why would he personally invite Gabriela?

Rebecca seethed. Gabriela. Gabriela. Was this illegitimate daughter sent by the heavens specifically to torment her? How was she everywhere at once?

Cindy stood quietly to the side until the storm subsided. The office was taut with tension as Rebecca pulled up the international news on her computer. Even in coverage of foreign royal events, the comments kept circling back to Gabriela's name — praising her for bringing Chinese artistry to the world stage. The more Rebecca read, the darker her expression became.

Cindy seized the moment. "Rebecca, I have an idea. I know how to embarrass her in front of everyone."

She had done her research. Gabriela used Sichuan embroidery — an extraordinarily complex and demanding technique. Yet in just two years, she had not only learned to design handbags but created the patterns herself. It seemed too convenient. Cindy suspected Presley had been doing most of the real

work behind the scenes while Gabriela played the presentable face of the project. Using a mentor's skills to make a student shine was not fair play.

Her plan was simple: after fashion week, arrange for a few reporters to confront Gabriela publicly and demand she demonstrate her embroidery designs on the spot. Even if her work was only marginally below the standard of the princess's handbag, they could accuse her of never having completed the piece on her own — of hiding behind Presley.

Rebecca looked at her with barely concealed skepticism. "And you think Gabriela is foolish enough to draw on the spot for a group of reporters?"

"If she refuses, we apply enough pressure until she has no choice," Cindy replied. "Rebecca, trust me this time. Leave it to me."

Rebecca hesitated. Cindy had never once succeeded in dealing with Gabriela before.

"Sis, I have a friend who works in planning at SK's headquarters. She can get me access from the inside. I won't fail this time."

Rebecca turned it over. Even if nothing came of it, at the very least it would cause Gabriela some irritation. She opened her drawer and transferred a sum of money to Cindy without another word.

News of Matthew's upcoming banquet reached Wesley's office with remarkable speed.

Billy entered, invitation in hand, his steps carrying the unmistakable energy of someone with surprising news. "Mr. Moss, Miss Gabriela is returning to the Howard family."

Wesley did not look up. "I know."

He also knew why she had made the decision.

He opened the invitation, turned it over in his hands for a moment, then said, "Prepare a gift — the most significant one at the event."